

# Is self-discrimination disrespectful?

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**Abstract** Victims of oppressive (e.g., sexist, racist or ableist) structures sometimes internalize the unjust norms that prevail in society. This can cause these victims to develop preferences or make decisions that seem bad for them. Focusing on such cases, we ask: is self-discrimination disrespectful? We show that some of the most sophisticated respect theories fail to provide any clear guidance. Specifically, we show that the widely recognized view that respect has two dimensions—an interest dimension and an autonomy dimension—delivers completely opposite verdicts depending on how these two dimensions (and the relation between them) are specified. A main takeaway point is that we need to distinguish between at least four different respect-based views. Whether self-discrimination caused by internalized oppression is disrespectful depends on which view one supports.

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Some philosophers have highlighted that treating people with equal respect involves an *interest* dimension and an *autonomy* dimension (e.g., Eidelson 2015; Hojlund 2021; Lippert-Rasmussen 2018a, 64; see also Pedersen 2021).<sup>1</sup> The two dimensions can be described, roughly, as follows:<sup>2</sup>

*The interest dimension:* respecting persons as persons requires giving equal weight to their interests.

*The autonomy dimension:* respecting persons as persons requires giving equal consideration to their autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

Paradigmatic cases of discrimination often involve problems on both dimensions. Imagine, for example, the racist employer who has prejudices about Black people and therefore does not hire a Black candidate. This employer fails to give equal weight to the candidate's interest in the job absent good reason for so failing.<sup>4</sup> And by relying on prejudiced generalizations—i.e., failing to see the applicant “as the person she has made herself” (Eidelson 2015, 142)—the employer does not show equal respect for the candidate's autonomy (ibid, ch. 5-6).

Sometimes, however, the two dimensions seem to point in opposite directions. Such a tension is highlighted in the literature on *paternalism*. When a person acts imprudently with respect to what is in their own interests, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to weigh the person's interests and autonomy simultaneously. Specifically, in such situations, giving weight to the person's

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<sup>1</sup> For example, according to Lippert-Rasmussen (2018a, 64), “[w]hat it is to relate as moral equals depends on one's account of moral standing, but we are roughly familiar with some central elements thereof. So, for instance, we would not be treating one another as individuals with an equal moral standing if we relate to one another as if one party's interests or will inherently count for more than that of others, morally speaking.”

<sup>2</sup> We will elaborate on the dimensions below.

<sup>3</sup> Cp. Hojlund (2021, 523). We will speak mostly in comparative terms—as we will be discussing discrimination—but it should, ultimately, make no difference to our arguments if the two dimensions were phrased in non-comparative terms instead. So feel free to think in those terms, if that is what you prefer. Also, we say respecting “persons as persons.” You may also think of this as “respecting persons as moral equals.” We will use them—respecting them as persons, and as moral equals—interchangeably in what follows.

<sup>4</sup> As one reviewer helpfully points out, one complication in determining a person's interests is the difference between the candidate having an interest in the job, and the job being in the candidate's interests. The former reflects what the candidate wants, and the latter reflects what would benefit the candidate. We return to this distinction below.

interests may involve acts—such as paternalism—that are disrespectful of the person’s autonomy. But, on the other hand, standing idly by when a person jeopardizes their own interests may also sometimes seem out of step with treating them respectfully (Hojlund 2021; Pedersen 2021). As we will emphasize below, this conflict between autonomy and interests is pertinent in situations where people's preferences and decisions are shaped by unjust societal structures, such as structural racism and sexism. For example, the conflict arises when the self-sacrificing housewife decides to provide for her husband and children without attaching much importance to her own interests and her preference for so doing is caused by sexism in society (Enoch 2020, 168). Or when people with impairments widely considered disabling prefer their situation to any alternative, but these preferences are shaped by ableist societal structures.<sup>5</sup> We thus ask: are such instances of self-discrimination disrespectful?

If we consult some of the most sophisticated respect-based theories that emphasize both dimensions (interests and autonomy), we will not find much guidance in such cases. These theories are ambiguous with respect to which interests should be given weight, as well as what it means to give weight to a person's autonomy, as we will argue. But, importantly, different answers to these questions provide different suggestions to what it takes to treat oneself (and others) with respect. Indeed, by distinguishing four respect views based on different interpretations of the interest and autonomy dimension, we show that some of these views lead to *opposite* verdicts in cases where a person’s preference is caused by structural injustice. This means that respect theorists will have to tell us which particular respect theory they support.

We end by distinguishing two different roles that a respect-based view must play (the former having to do with what it takes for an act to be disrespectful; the second having to do with what it takes to respond respectfully to disrespectful acts). We relate the second question to different views on paternalism – and suggest that a contextualist view is needed to answer it satisfactorily. But the

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<sup>5</sup> Begon (2023, ch. 6), focusing on adaptive preferences, discusses when the testimony of people who have disabling impairments should be trusted.

most important upshot of our paper is that there are more respect accounts than has so far been acknowledged, and that respect theorists must tell us which one they support.

A few initial remarks. First, as mentioned, we will discuss discrimination below. Since we are not particularly interested in discussions of how we should define discrimination in this paper, we will simply assume what we take to be a standard definition:

*Generic discrimination:* “An agent, X, discriminates against someone, Y, in relation to another, Z, by  $\Phi$ -ing (e.g., hiring Z rather than Y) if, and only if:

- (i) There is a property, P, such that Y has P or X believes that Y has P, and Z does not have P or X believes that Z does not have P,
- (ii) X treats Y worse than he treats or would treat Z by  $\Phi$ -ing, and
- (iii) It is because (X believes that) Y has P and (X believes that) Z does not have P that X treats Y worse than Z by  $\Phi$ -ing” (Lippert-Rasmussen 2013, 15).<sup>6</sup>

Note that this definition assumes that discrimination is necessarily comparative: it is a matter of how X treats Y in relation to Z. But since we will discuss self-discrimination below, it is important to emphasize that X (discriminator) and Y (discriminatee) may be one and the same person on this definition. As Lippert-Rasmussen (2013, 21-22) says, “it might even be that a discriminator discriminates against herself in virtue of some property she has, e.g., a woman recommends that one of her male peers be promoted because of his gender despite her being the best qualified. We might label this form of discrimination, where the discriminator and the discriminatee are one and the same individual, ‘reflexive.’ Some of the most damaging forms of discrimination are those in which discrimination is, so to speak, internalized by the victims of discrimination and involve some sort of abhorrence of what one is.”<sup>7</sup> But if you are wary of self-discrimination talk, you may in

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<sup>6</sup> For other definitions, see, e.g., Altman (2020); Eidelson (2015, 17); Lippert-Rasmussen (2020, 55); Moreau (2020, 15); Rasmussen (2020); Sangiovanni (2017, 116-118); Thomsen (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Cp. Scanlon (2018, 64).

what follows think of self-discrimination, not as *discrimination*, but as *discrimination\**. We are interested in the moral status of *discrimination\** on respect-based views—that is, instances in which members of disadvantaged groups treat themselves in seemingly harmful ways where their doing so is a result of them living in an unjust society—not in whether such acts, conceptually speaking, qualify as *discrimination*.

Second, we will follow those mentioned above in saying that respecting people involves an autonomy dimension and an interest dimension. Others say, for instance, that the state must treat its citizens with “equal concern and respect” (Dworkin 1977, 272-273), where *concern* has to do with interests, and *respect* has to do with autonomy (e.g., Darwall 2002, 14-16). Whether we take respect to be about both interests and autonomy, or whether we take respect to be about autonomy, and concern to be about interests, is, as far as we can see, a merely terminological matter (of speaking in terms of equal respect, or equal respect and concern). And since those with which we will primarily be concerned in what follows speak in the former way, we will do so as well.

Third, and relatedly, our article assumes a particular framework. We are investigating the question, “is self-discrimination disrespectful?” Thus, our investigation concerns the respect-based view of what makes discrimination wrongful. We will argue that the respect-based view of the wrongness of discrimination, as it is currently laid out, is importantly ambiguous. Our aim here is thus not to defend the respect-based view of the wrongness of discrimination. We simply assume the truth of this view to explore what it has to say in cases of self-discrimination (particularly, in situations where people's preferences and decisions to self-discriminate are shaped by unjust societal structures). We lay out the view in detail below, but it may be useful to quickly emphasize how we see this view.<sup>8</sup> The respect-based view of the wrongness of discrimination is a particular view of what makes discrimination wrongful—a view which competes with other views, such as the harm-based account.<sup>9</sup> For the sake of investigation, we assume that it delivers a plausible view of

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<sup>8</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for urging us to make these clarifications.

<sup>9</sup> The harm-based account is most prominently defended by Lippert-Rasmussen (2013).

what makes discrimination wrongful—it is indeed a prominent view in the discrimination literature—and ask: is self-discrimination disrespectful?

### *Equal Respect*

Defining (dis)respect is a delicate matter.<sup>10</sup> One of the most influential definitions of respect is provided by Darwall (1977). He distinguishes between *appraisal respect* and *recognition respect*. The former is shown to “persons or features which are held to manifest their excellence as persons or as engaged in some specific pursuit” (ibid, 38). You may, say, show appraisal respect for Thomas Mann’s abilities as an author. Recognition respect “consists in giving appropriate consideration or recognition to some feature of its object in deliberating about what to do” (ibid). You may, say, show recognition respect for Thomas Mann if you give appropriate recognition to the fact that he is a person when deliberating about how to treat him.

Eidelson’s influential account of the wrongness of discrimination builds on Darwall’s notion of recognition respect (Eidelson 2015, 76). He suggests that “discrimination is intrinsically objectionable when it is basically disrespectful of the personhood of those who are discriminated against” (Eidelson 2015, 95). Eidelson’s theory divides into a *moral worth (mainly interest) component* and an *autonomy component*, and one must satisfy both to treat others respectfully. The autonomy component has to do with treating the other as an individual autonomous being. Satisfying it requires “(i) taking evidence of her autonomous choices seriously in forming judgments about her and (ii) making judgments about her likely behavior in a way that respects her capacity, as an autonomous individual, to choose how to act for herself” (Eidelson 2015, 130; see also Eidelson 2013, 216).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, philosophers have different views on what makes discrimination disrespectful (see, e.g., Alexander 1992; Arneson 2006; Eidelson 2015; Hellman 2008).

<sup>11</sup> As Lippert-Rasmussen (2018b, 325-326) explains, Eidelson does not phrase the autonomy component in comparative terms. But since discrimination is necessarily comparative, he must do so if it is to be a part of an account which explains what makes discrimination objectionable. Specifically, Lippert-Rasmussen (2018b: 326) suggests the following formulation of the autonomy component in Eidelson’s theory: “in X’s deliberations behind his

The interest component builds on the assumption that persons have value in themselves, and that they have this value to an equal extent. Central to it is the following thesis:

*The Interest Thesis:* To respect a person's equal value relative to other persons one must value her interests equally with those of other persons, absent good reason for discounting them (Eidelson 2015, 97).

In brief, to treat another person with equal respect, one must weigh the person's interests and autonomy equally with the interests and autonomy of others in one's deliberation and act accordingly. As described in the introduction, this requirement is clearly not met when the Black candidate is rejected by a racist employer. But, as we will illustrate below, there are other cases where the analysis is more complicated. Consider, e.g., the following case by Enoch:

*Starving Woman:* A young woman grows up in a highly conservative society [...] where it is common for women to malnourish themselves to better feed (well beyond need) their husbands and male children. And she chooses to malnourish herself in this way. Gender norms play a role here, of course, but at the end of the day, the woman prefers to have her husband eat more than enough rather than have enough for herself (Enoch 2020, 168).

We can describe the woman's action as an example of *self-discrimination* based on gender: The woman treats herself worse than she treats her husband and her male children on account of her gender. The case stipulates that the woman "chooses" and "prefers" to malnourish herself. Does this mean that the woman's interests and autonomy are given appropriate weight, i.e., that the

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discriminatory act, X fails to give appropriate weight to the fact that Y is autonomous, but does not fail to do so in the case of Z, or fails to give equal weight to X and Z being autonomous."

gendered self-discrimination in question is not problematic from a respect-based perspective? Intuitively, it seems that it should play a role that the woman's choices are made in a context of unjust gender structures—that her preferences and choices are most likely shaped by these structures—but it is not clear how the respect-based theory takes this fact into account.

In the following sections, we will demonstrate how different specifications of Eidelson's respect-based theory of the wrongness of discrimination will generate different responses to Alienated Starving Woman (and similar cases). This is not only relevant to debates about the wrongness of discrimination; the argument invites everyone who includes an interest and an autonomy component to clarify and defend their theory (of respect) accordingly.

#### *The Interest Dimension: Subjective vs. Objective*

We will argue that both the autonomy component and the interest component of Eidelson's theory are ambiguous in that both may be understood in two distinct ways. Let us start with the interest component, and thus the interest thesis (which we laid out above). It is not necessarily contradictory to say that a person can have an interest in something, say, smoking, without smoking being in the person's interests. The reason is that a person's interests can be determined in different ways, e.g., by consulting the person's own desires or preferences (smoking), or asking what is objectively prudentially valuable (not smoking). More broadly, it is common to classify a person's interests with what is prudentially valuable, which is often described through the distinction between “subjective states” and “objective prudential goods” (Haybron 2020, sec. 1.1). Based on this, we may distinguish between two versions of the interest thesis:

*The subjective interest thesis:* To respect a person's equal value relative to other persons one must value her [**subjective**] interests equally with those of other persons, absent good reason for discounting them (Eidelson 2015, 97).



*The objective interest thesis:* To respect a person’s equal value relative to other persons one must value her [**objective**] interests equally with those of other persons, absent good reason for discounting them (Eidelson 2015, 97).

Roughly, a person’s *subjective interests* are interests that the person has from the person’s own perspective, e.g., things which the person desires or to which they have pro-attitudes. One way of illustrating this is through the idea of *endorsement*:<sup>12</sup> something, *I*, is in an individual’s interest only if the individual endorses *I*. If they do not endorse *I*, promoting *I* does not promote the individual’s interest (cp. Begon 2023, 174).<sup>13</sup> If you do not like reading books, I do not promote your interests by buying you books. One advantage of the subjective interest thesis is precisely that it accommodates people’s own view of what their interests are. As Lippert-Rasmussen (2018a, 64) puts it, “[i]t could be that we are both disposed to treat each other’s interests equally, morally speaking, but that I dismiss summarily your interpretation of what your interests are and impose my interpretation of those interests on you.” As this illustrates, moral neutrality considerations may speak in favor of focusing on subjective interests. We leave it to individuals themselves to decide what is in their interest; to respect them, we must regulate our actions towards them based on what *they* take to be in their interest.<sup>14</sup> On this understanding of the interest thesis, you must value a person’s subjective interests equally with those of other persons to respect their equal value.

*Objective interests*, on the other hand, do “not depend on the target’s desiring it or adopting other pro-attitudes toward it” (Hanna 2018, 103; see also Conly 2013, 102-12; Le Grand and New 2015, 30-31). The content of objective interests has inherent worth or value that is largely independent of individual preferences, opinions, or subjective judgments. Speaking again in terms of

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<sup>12</sup> On endorsement, see Dworkin (1988) and Frankfurt (1971).

<sup>13</sup> Another way to capture what is central about subjectivism is through what Dorsey (2017b, 687) refers to as the *The Constraint*, “an object, event, state of affairs, etc.,  $\varphi$  is good for an agent  $x$  only if  $x$  takes a valuing attitude (of the right sort) towards  $\varphi$ ” (Dorsey 2017b, 687; see also Arneson 1999, 116; Dorsey 2017a, 199).

<sup>14</sup> Cp. “We should respect actual preferences for reasons similar to those that explain why we should respect choices—they are integral parts of who we are” (Grill 2015b, 704).

endorsement, on this view, something can be in an individual's interest even if the individual does not endorse it. It can be in your interest to read books even if you do not believe so. One advantage of the objective understanding of interests is that there are certain subjective interests that people may have that just do not seem valuable—e.g., malnourishing yourself to feed your husband well beyond need, or spending the entire day counting blades of grass (Rawls 1971, 432)—and it is unclear that respecting people requires respecting their seemingly non-valuable subjective interests.<sup>15</sup> On this understanding of the interest thesis, you must value a person's objective interests equally with those of other persons to respect their equal value.<sup>16</sup>

While theories of prudential value are often classified according to the subjective-objective distinction (Rodogno 2016: 290), another prevalent taxonomy concerns the difference between (a) Objective List Theories, (b) Desire-Fulfilment Theories, and (c) Hedonistic Theories (Parfit 1986, 493ff).<sup>17</sup> Parfit (1986, 493) describes the difference between these theories as follows:

On Hedonistic Theories, what would be best for someone is what would make his life happiest. On Desire-Fulfilment Theories, what would be best for someone is what, throughout his life, would best fulfil his desires. On Objective List Theories, certain things are good or bad for us, whether or not we want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things.

While Objective List Theories can be said to represent a paradigmatic way of specifying a person's objective interests, and Desire-Fulfilment Theories can be said to represent a paradigmatic way of

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<sup>15</sup> As Chan (2000, 13-14) illustrates: "Compare, for example, the lives of two persons: John, who is wise, upright, talented in music and philosophy, and has a good family and a few very good friends; Mark, a drug-addict, who spends all his time chasing after elusive drug pleasures at the expense of all other goods. I think no reasonable person would dispute the judgment that John's way of life is more worthwhile than Mark's."

<sup>16</sup> Of course, a hybrid view—combining subjective and objective interests—is possible as well. As we will see, matters are complicated enough when we focus on non-hybrid views, so that is what we will do. But it should be fairly easy, in light of what we say below, to extend our analysis to hybrid views.

<sup>17</sup> We are grateful to two anonymous reviewers for encouraging us to reflect on this alternative distinction.

specifying subjective interests, it is debatable how to categorize Hedonistic Theories (although these are often classified as subjective, since they ground interests in the “subjective states” of the individual) (Haybron 2020, sec. 1.1; Heathwood 2014, 207-208).<sup>18</sup> However, even if Hedonistic Theories cannot be categorized within the distinction between subjective and objective interests, this is not an objection to our argument. Our aim is not to provide an exhaustive list of possible respect accounts (and to defend one of these). Instead, we intend to illustrate that respect theories are underspecified, making them difficult (if not impossible) to apply. While we focus on the distinction between objective and subjective interests, we are open to alternative ways of cutting the cake. For example, it would be possible to formulate variants of the interest thesis that reflect Parfit’s tripartite distinction (or some third distinction, for that matter). Of course, this would further complicate the analysis, since it would amount to distinguishing six—instead of four—possible respect accounts.

The above subjective-objective distinction pertaining to the interest dimension concerns the *content* of the person’s interests. In the next section, we will focus on a distinction pertaining to the autonomy dimension: whether the interests in question are aligned with or manifest the person’s deeper commitments and values. Here, the *process* or the causal history of the interests in question becomes relevant (see Enoch 2020, 183).

#### *The Autonomy Dimension: Non-Alienation vs. Sovereignty*

According to Eidelson (2015, 142), respect for autonomy

demand[s] that we not supplant a person's distinctive role as the controlling force in her own life. That is what we are doing, for instance, when we forbear from imposing a blood transfusion on someone out of respect for her autonomy. We recognize that

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<sup>18</sup> For an in-depth explanation of the challenges in relation to categorizing Hedonism within the subjective-objective distinction, see Heathwood (2014, 208-211).

her scheme of values, commitments, and projects differs from our own; and we recognize that, when it comes to her life, it would be wrong for us to pursue ours at the expense of hers.

The second distinction that we want to put in play is the distinction between *autonomy as non-alienation* and *autonomy as sovereignty* (Enoch 2017; 2020; 2022).<sup>19</sup> In our view, Eidelson’s description of autonomy is ambiguous between these two views of why autonomy is valuable. The former—autonomy as non-alienation—has to do with living one’s life in a way that manifests one’s values and deep commitments.<sup>20</sup> The latter—autonomy as sovereignty—has to do with being given the final say in self-regarding matters. Enoch illustrates the distinction with the following example. He imagines asking his daughter to pass him the salt at the dinner table. She refuses. But he insists, explains to her that he knows the health risks, but that it is, after all, *his* body, *his* life, and he would like the salt. If she continues to refuse, she violates his autonomy as sovereignty: he is not given the final say on the matter. But she does not violate his autonomy as non-alienation. His ability to live his life in accordance with his values and deep commitments—including being there for his children in the future—is not threatened by her refusing to pass him the salt. In this way, an interference may violate autonomy as sovereignty, but not autonomy as non-alienation (Enoch 2017, 31-32).

The above quote by Eidelson (about what respect for autonomy demands) seems, at least partly, to reflect autonomy as nonalienation (he points to recognizing “her scheme of values”). However, sometimes, a person’s projects, interests and preferences do not manifest the person’s deep commitments and values. In such situations, the person’s autonomy *as non-alienation* is not

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<sup>19</sup> For a similar distinction, see Brudney (2009); Parry (2017, 375); Shiffrin (2004); and Tadros (2017, chs. 8 and 11).

<sup>20</sup> As Enoch (2020: 163-164) explains, relations may be highly important for autonomy on his view, but he remains agnostic as to whether that takes us all the way to *relational autonomy*. We will remain so as well. On relational autonomy, see, e.g., Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000); Oshana (2006); and Veltman and Piper (2014).

respected if we regulate our actions towards the person in view of these projects, interests, and preferences.

Take for example the case of the Jehovah's Witness in need of a blood transfusion who is under extreme social pressure to refuse it. Sometimes, the choice not to accept a blood transfusion may not correspond to the Jehovah's Witness's actual deep commitments. Tännsjö (2015, 716-717) presents a real-life example where this is not unlikely to be the case: After giving birth, the mother suffers from a life-threatening haemorrhage. When the doctor asks for permission to give a blood transfusion, her first reaction is "I can't let go of life" and "I have to think of my kids" (ibid, 716). However, afterwards, the woman requests advice from church elders who are allowed to enter the hospital room. Her encounter with the elders results in her changing her mind. She refuses the blood transfusion and dies shortly after (ibid, 717). Of course, we cannot know for sure that the woman's initially expressed desire to live on (and be there for her children in the future) outweighs her later expressed desire not to receive blood, but there is an imminent risk of this being the case. In other words, it is likely that receiving the blood transfusion would be more reflective of the woman's deeper commitments than not receiving it. *If so*, the woman's autonomy as non-alienation is *not* respected when the doctor forbears from imposing the blood transfusion on her.

It is different when it comes to autonomy *as sovereignty*. In the above Jehovah's Witness case, we might say that having a blood transfusion "is something over which I should have the last say; it's within my area of sovereignty, so to speak" (Enoch 2017, 32). According to this sovereignty idea, recall, autonomy is violated if the woman is not given the final say on the matter. As Enoch (2017, 33) explains, "[i]f the decision is mine to make and I've actually decided one way, the fact that I would have decided it differently under different conditions is just neither here nor there." That is, when we care about autonomy *as sovereignty*, what we care about is that the person is given the final say, and not how the person's interests, projects, or choices came about (cp. Grill 2015b,

699). Eidelson may be read as having this idea of sovereignty in mind when he, in the quote above, points to the person being “the controlling force in her own life.”

These distinctions between, on the one hand, subjective and objective interests and, on the other hand, autonomy as non-alienation and sovereignty cut across each other. This means that we are now able to identify at least four respect views—views which have not been distinguished in the literature. These views share the assumption that treating people with equal respect involves weighing people’s interests and autonomy equally. But they have significantly different implications. This is best illustrated, we think, in cases in which some people discriminate against themselves due to unjust societal structures, such as *Starving Woman*. The four views reach very different verdicts in such cases, as we will now show.

*a. Objective interests and autonomy as non-alienation*

One view is to take the interest dimension to concern objective interests, and the autonomy dimension to concern autonomy as non-alienation. This view provides a clear verdict in *Starving Woman*. The content of the woman’s preference (to malnourish herself to better feed her husband and male children well beyond need) is not objectively valuable (it is, we take it, in one’s objective interest to be well-nourished).<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the objective interest thesis implicates that the woman should *not* weigh this preference as an interest in her deliberation. Instead, she should weigh her objective interest in being well-nourished equally with the interests of others, including her husband’s, to satisfy the objective interest thesis. And she fails to do so in this case, which means that she fails to respect her equal value to her husband (cp. Hojlund 2022; Lippert-Rasmussen 2013, 21-22). Thus, *Starving Woman*’s self-discrimination is disrespectful on the objective interest-dimension.

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<sup>21</sup> It is possible that the circumstances are such that malnourishing herself is the choice that best realizes the woman’s objective interests overall, e.g., because being well-nourished comes at the cost of domestic violence or other social sanctions that are objectively bad for her. In such a situation, a decision must be made as to whether the interest thesis concerns her local or global objective interests. That would add another layer of complexity which we, to not make things too complicated, leave out.

If we consider the autonomy dimension, we have reason to think that Starving Woman is not acting autonomously in the nonalienation sense (and, in any case, we may assume so for argumentative purposes). There are, at least, two different ways in which Starving Woman may disrespect her autonomy as non-alienation. First, self-discriminatory starvation may simply not be part of Starving Woman’s deeper values and commitments. In this case, there is an “internal tension” between Starving Woman’s preferences and her deep commitments, which means that acting on the preference “doesn’t fully manifest the value of autonomy” (as non-alienation) (Enoch 2020, 186). A second possibility is that Starving Woman has internalized the oppressive structures and norms to such an extent that they have not only influenced her preferences but have also shaped her deeper values and commitments. For example, the actions of Starving Woman may be an instance of so-called “character planning” (Begon 2023, 187-189; Colburn, 2011), where she consciously devalues opportunities that she is deprived of. If being well-nourished as a woman is associated with severe social sanctions, she may consciously change her preferences and devalue her interest in adequate nutrition.<sup>22</sup> Here, there is no internal tension between Starving Woman’s preferences and deep commitments. However, according to Enoch, this does not mean that her self-discriminatory starvation is respectful of her autonomy as non-alienation. Enoch explains the problem in Starving Woman as follows:

her relevant preferences were not merely shaped—like all preferences—under the causal influence of all sorts of factors external to her. Crucially, they were shaped under the causal influence of a social order that routinely violates her rights, that wrongs her. Preferences shaped in this way are nonautonomous, even if endorsed. Indeed, if they are endorsed, this may just indicate the depth of the oppression, not its absence. The

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<sup>22</sup> The woman’s preferences may be irrational and shaped by covert influences, but they need not be. Some argue that *adaptive* preferences are “irrational” (see, e.g., Bovens 2002; Bruckner 2009) or result from “covert influences” (see, e.g., Colburn 2011). What characterizes adaptive preferences is a separate matter that we do not address in this article (for discussion, see, e.g., Enoch 2020; Khader 2011; Terlazzo 2016; Westlund 2009). We focus on whether the preferences—whether we describe them as adaptive or not—are autonomous.

causal role played by injustice here explains why it is that these preferences (or consent or choice based on them) do not manifest the value of autonomy (as nonalienation), for it shows an important sense in which these preference[s] are not truly the agent's. (Enoch 2020, 185).

Thus, the *history* of the preferences, values and commitments is crucial for determining autonomy as non-alienation. It is key that Starving Woman's preferences and deep commitments are a product of injustice.<sup>23</sup> For these reasons, it seems that Starving Woman's self-discrimination is disrespectful of her autonomy as non-alienation (the autonomy dimension).<sup>24</sup>

At this point, one might object that this result—that her self-discrimination is disrespectful—is implausible because it seems to entail that we should blame her for her act. But since she is a victim to the unjust structures—it is because of the sexist structures that she wants to starve herself to feed her husband well beyond need—this is to add *insult to injury*.<sup>25,26</sup> We have the following three responses. First, even if this were true, and you think this is a concern, this might simply point to the fact that you should not accept this version of the respect account. As we will show below, there is at least one respect-based view on which her act would not amount to disrespectful discrimination (i.e., the Subjective Sovereignty View). Second, no blaming need be involved here. We are investigating whether she is treating herself in a disrespectful manner. The act may be classified as disrespectful, but if the act is a result of the Starving Woman living under sexist structures, we

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<sup>23</sup> As Enoch (2020, 183) explains, what matters for autonomy as non-alienation is the circumstances rather than the content of the preference: “for any preference-content, we can describe a possible context—historical and otherwise—that renders that preference autonomous.”

<sup>24</sup> We have been utilizing Enoch's distinction between autonomy as nonalienation and sovereignty (as explained earlier, we find both dimensions in Eidelson's description of his autonomy condition). This is, as explained, a historical and moralized view. Our aim in this paper is not to settle how we should understand autonomy. There might be other views, e.g., Frankfurt's (1971) view on which autonomy requires harmony between lower- and higher-order preferences or Brandt's (1979) view on which autonomous preferences are those that would survive “cognitive psychotherapy,” who would not necessarily reach the verdict that Starving Woman is alienated. But, again, our point is not to defend a particular account of autonomy, but to show that there are more respect accounts than has so far been acknowledged, and that respect theorists must tell us which one they support. And one could have made this point by utilizing other accounts of autonomy as well. We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

<sup>25</sup> We thank Axel Gosseries for raising this objection.

<sup>26</sup> Begon (2015) raises such a concern in relation to adaptive preferences.



clearly would not blame her for the act. But this does not preclude us from asking whether the act amounts to disrespectful discrimination (Enoch, 2020: 194). Third, and relatedly, from the fact that the act is an instance of disrespectful discrimination, nothing follows about what should be done. That is a separate question.<sup>27</sup> So it does not follow, if it is an instance of disrespectful discrimination, that we should, say, force-feed Starving Woman.<sup>28</sup> This might indeed be to add insult to injury. Still, the respect-based views may differ when it comes to this separate question, as we will see.

A second objection, which one may raise at this point, is that our analysis has the wrong focus. We should not focus on whether particular acts are discriminatory or not. When structures are unjust in the way they are in Starving Woman's society, we should focus directly on the *structures*. After all, it is the structures that are unjust.<sup>29,30</sup> We have the following responses. First, we agree that if we could change the sexist structures under which Starving Woman lives, we should do so. After all, sexist structures are unjust. But we take it that this is, in many cases, not feasible in the shorter term. In this timespan, it is not clear that we should only focus on structures (as opposed to both acts and structures).

This speaks to our second remark. Focusing on particular acts—such as discrimination—may be helpful in the sense that it can illustrate how structural injustice manifests itself in particular acts. In this sense, an analysis focusing on acts can be helpful in making clear how structural injustice affects people's interactions in unjust ways. Relatedly, analysing particular acts—such as Starving Woman's self-discrimination—may precisely point to why the structures are unjust (e.g., they potentially lead women to internalize the structures and disrespect themselves), and thus may point to why, when it comes to the appropriate (e.g., political) response to such cases of discrimination,

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<sup>27</sup> A point to which we return in the final section.

<sup>28</sup> See also Stoljar's (2018: 233) distinction between *autonomy* and *having an authentic agential perspective*.

<sup>29</sup> We thank Sally Haslanger for raising this objection.

<sup>30</sup> This resembles Young's (2011: 195-196) criticism: "Considering discrimination the only or primary injustice that women or people of color suffer in American society focuses attention on the wrong issues. Discrimination is primarily an agent-oriented, fault-oriented concept. Thus it tends to focus attention on the perpetrator and a particular action or policy, rather than on victims and their situation ... In its focus on individual agents, the concept of discrimination obscures and even tends to deny the structural and institutional framework of oppression."

we should do what we can to combat the unjust structures (at least in the longer term). Indeed, it seems too strong to say that we should never focus our moral attention on acts in societies with unjust background structures.

Lastly, we would like to emphasize that this structural criticism speaks against other prominent accounts of the wrongness of discrimination—such as the harm-based account,<sup>31</sup> the expressive account,<sup>32</sup> and the deliberative freedom account<sup>33</sup>—as well, in that they try to identify what it takes for discriminatory acts to be wrongful. Thus, it is not a criticism of the respect-based view as such, as opposed to a criticism of most of the literature on the wrongness of discrimination. Of course, this may simply show that the whole literature has the wrong focus.<sup>34</sup> But we will continue with the assumption that there is value in focusing on particular acts of discrimination, both because the respect-based view is meant to be an alternative to the other accounts just mentioned, which also focus on acts, and because it illustrates a particular way in which the unjust structure becomes manifest.

The upshot is that, on the objective interests and autonomy as non-alienation account, Starving Woman's self-discrimination is an instance of disrespectful discrimination qua failing to satisfy the interest and autonomy components.

*b. Objective interests and autonomy as sovereignty*

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<sup>31</sup> See Lippert-Rasmussen (2006; 2013); Rasmussen (2019); Slavny and Parr (2015).

<sup>32</sup> See Hellman (2008; 2017) and Scanlon (2008).

<sup>33</sup> See Moreau (2010; 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, an anonymous reviewer suggests that Young's criticism cuts even deeper: insofar as the discrimination discourse uses a distributive account of justice ("the distributive paradigm"), it distracts from and obscures the underlying oppression problem. The discrimination discourse makes it seem as if redistributive solutions could be devised to help people like Starving Woman; it pushes us to think about her situation as a matter of redistributing primary goods. But Starving Woman's problem is not the deprivation of primary goods (food), but that she has internalized the oppressive norms in society. To resolve this, we need Young's politics of difference, not redistributive politics. We don't have the space to dive deep into this issue, but two remarks. First, it is not obvious that the discrimination discourse solely uses a distributive account of justice. Some think, for instance, that discrimination is wrong for reasons having to do with relational inequality (e.g., Kolodny, 2023: 185; Moreau, 2020: ch. 2). Indeed, even Eidelson's respect-based view—which is our focus here—does not use a distributive account of justice. In any case, even if Eidelson's respect-based view were distributive, that would not challenge our argument. It would simply show that the respect-based view is not only ambiguous (as we argue); it also provides the wrong solution to the (underlying) problem.

A second respect view takes the interest dimension to be about objective interests, and the autonomy dimension to be about autonomy as sovereignty. In *Starving Woman*, these dimensions seem to pull in opposite directions. *Starving Woman* does not give equal weight to her own objective interests compared to her husband's interest in being well-nourished, so she fails to satisfy the objective interest thesis. But the decision about whether and how much to eat is taken by *her*. So, by choosing to malnourish herself, she gives appropriate weight to her own autonomy as sovereignty.

Can the objective interests and autonomy as sovereignty account provide a verdict in these cases where interests and autonomy conflict? According to the objective interest thesis, recall, *Starving Woman* can rightly discount her objective interests *if she has good reasons for doing so*. Thus, one potential reason for not considering her to be violating the interest thesis is the fact that she acts autonomously (in the sovereignty sense), which may itself always be a good reason for discounting her own interests. If this is the case, it means that, when the person's interests and autonomy come into conflict, interests must always "take a back seat" (Hanna 2018, 111n53). The person's autonomy is thereby treated as *structurally decisive*. A person's autonomy is structurally decisive when "it is meant to supplant the reason-giving force of other considerations not because it outweighs those other considerations but because it is meant to silence, or exclude, those other considerations from the practical deliberations of the subject of the demand" (Groll 2012, 701).

Alternatively, one might think that *Starving Woman's* autonomy as sovereignty *sometimes* outweighs the relevant interest-considerations. According to this view, the person's autonomy (as sovereignty) comes to be *substantially decisive* in a given situation when reasons appealing to the person's autonomy as sovereignty have greater weight than reasons appealing to the person's interests (ibid, 701-702).<sup>35</sup> Thus, whether the account implies that *Starving Woman's* self-

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<sup>35</sup> Of course, it is also logically possible to deny that a person's autonomy (as sovereignty) is ever a good reason, which would amount to treating the relevant interests-considerations as structurally decisive.

discrimination is disrespectful may depend on how we determine the relationship between the two components.

*c. Subjective interests and autonomy as non-alienation*

A third respect view takes the interest dimension to concern subjective interests, and the autonomy dimension to concern autonomy as non-alienation. Here, what must be respected is Starving Woman's subjective interests and that she is living her life in a way that reflects her deep commitments and values. As argued above, Starving Woman does not respect her autonomy (as non-alienation); her self-discrimination thereby fails to satisfy the autonomy dimension. However, since she acts in accordance with her own subjective interests, we cannot say that she discounts these interests. She does not fail to satisfy the subjective interest thesis. It is thus the autonomy dimension alone that is violated. This also means that, if her preferences were autonomous, the woman's self-discrimination would not be disrespectful on this subjective interest and autonomy as non-alienation account.

This illustrates that this view is in the same boat as the objective interests and autonomy as sovereignty view: unless we want one of the components to take a backseat (as in the structural decisiveness case), we will necessarily end up having to balance the two components. And balancing may often not be a simple task. This may not be a problem in itself. But it at least shows that, if you opt for this type of respect account, you need to tell a plausible story of how to balance the two components in cases—such as Starving Woman—in which what the person wants is a result of structural injustice.

*d. Subjective interests and autonomy as sovereignty*

Finally, consider a fourth respect view, concerned with subjective interests and autonomy as sovereignty. On this account, Starving Woman's self-discrimination does not amount to disrespectful discrimination. She fails neither the subjective interest thesis, because she values these choices

herself, nor to respect her autonomy as sovereignty, because she is the one choosing. And this is so irrespective of the choice's content and its causes. This account is thus the most permissive respect-based account of the wrongness of discrimination of the four we have distinguished.

We may summarize our analysis as follows:

*Table 1. Starving Women and Four Respect Views.*

	<b>Non-alienation</b>	<b>Sovereignty</b>
<b>Objective</b>	<u><i>The Objective Non-Alienation View:</i></u> Starving Woman an instance of disrespectful discrimination.	<u><i>The Objective Sovereignty View:</i></u> <i>Starving Woman</i> not an instance of disrespectful discrimination if autonomy as sovereignty is structurally decisive; potentially disrespectful if autonomy as sovereignty is substantially decisive.
<b>Subjective</b>	<u><i>The Subjective Non-Alienation View:</i></u> Starving Woman an instance of disrespectful discrimination if non-alienated autonomy is structurally decisive; potentially non-disrespectful if non-alienated autonomy is substantially decisive.	<u><i>The Subjective Sovereignty View:</i></u> Starving Woman an instance of non-disrespectful discrimination.

We can see most clearly why drawing these distinctions is important by comparing the Objective Non-Alienation View with the Subjective Sovereignty View. According to the former, Starving Woman is an instance of disrespectful self-discrimination. According to the latter, it is not. As this shows, not only are the accounts not extensionally equivalent; in some cases, they reach opposite verdicts. And this means that proponents of respect-based views of the wrongness of discrimination must be clear on which view they defend.<sup>36</sup>

*The next steps*

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<sup>36</sup> Of course, it is also possible to hold a combined view that includes several of the components. This, of course, just adds to the complexity.

Cases involving disadvantaged individuals in societies with structural injustice, such as structural racism and sexism, bring forth that choices must be made by respect-based theorists who emphasize both interests and autonomy. Whether self-discrimination is disrespectful depends on which respect account you endorse. At this point, one might ask the question: which respect account should we choose, then?

Importantly, we think there are two different questions that must be answered when deciding between respect accounts. The first question is what it takes for an act of self-discrimination to be disrespectful. This is the question with which we have been concerned. We cannot, for reasons of space, provide a satisfactory answer here, but we have illustrated that it is an important question for respect theorists to answer in future work. The second question is what it takes to respond respectfully to such cases of self-discrimination.<sup>37</sup> When it comes to the second question, it seems to us that if an agent disrespectfully discriminates against herself, then this is a weighty moral reason to prevent her discriminatory act. This leaves open the possibility that there are (many) cases in which preventing disrespectful self-discrimination is *not* justified all things considered. The latter is important, since there will potentially be strong countervailing reasons for *not* preventing disrespectful self-discrimination, for example, that such prevention will require too intrusive interventions.

Whether this view—that it is a weighty reason in favor of preventing self-discrimination that it is disrespectful—implies endorsing paternalism depends on the underlying respect theory that one espouses. For example, the view paves the way for the possibility of justifiable *soft paternalism* in alienation cases, such as Starving Woman, if one supports the Objective Non-Alienation View. In brief, soft paternalists consider it morally objectionable to interfere with a person, to protect the person's own interests, if the person acts sufficiently autonomously. As Hanna (2018, 149-150) presents soft paternalism, whether a self-regarding choice is protected from interference depends

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<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of how to balance respect and paternalism in the context of affirmative action, see Bengtson and Pedersen (2024).

not only on how it affects the decision-maker's interests,<sup>38</sup> but also on “whether there was a flaw in the process of deliberation leading up to the choice or on whether the choice reflects the decision-maker's genuine preferences and values” (ibid, 150). Starving Woman's self-discrimination does not manifest her autonomy as non-alienation; it reflects, if anything, the sexist oppressors' preferences and values (Enoch 2020, 201). Thus, according to soft paternalists, her self-discrimination may not be protected from interference, then, because it is not, in the relevant sense, *her* (non-alienated) choice.<sup>39</sup> And this is why the Objective Non-Alienation View seems to pave the way for the possibility of justifiable soft paternalism in such alienation cases.<sup>40</sup>

By contrast, consider the Objective Sovereignty View. If we treat the autonomy part (sovereignty) as structurally decisive, such that the interest part (objective interests) always takes a back seat, the view comes close to what Feinberg (1986, 15) describes as “hard anti-paternalism.” This view denies that it can *ever* be legitimate to interfere with a person's self-harming conduct. What the person wants is structurally decisive irrespective of why the person wants it (including irrespective of whether the person's will is in some sense alienated). And Starving Woman is making the choice herself. These two examples illustrate the potential relations between disrespectful self-discrimination and the justification of paternalism, but we will leave it to future work to investigate this relationship further.

Finally, what is the respectful response to cases of disrespectful self-discrimination also seems to depend on *contextual* matters. If the self-discrimination choices that result from unjust structures concern intimate, e.g., sexual, matters, it seems to us that interfering measures would be difficult to justify. When it comes to issues of bodily integrity, the state has strong moral reason to

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<sup>38</sup> Here, the decision-maker's interests matter *indirectly*: whether a person acts sufficiently autonomously depends on the interests at stake. For example, higher autonomy standards are required when the stakes are high (e.g., Russian Roulette with live bullets), whereas lower autonomy standards apply when the stakes are more trivial (e.g., Russian Roulette with blanks). See Le Grand and New (2015, 122).

<sup>39</sup> Compare this with Feinberg's (1986: 14) example of the drug-addict whose “drug-deluded self is *not* his ‘real self,’ and his frenzied desire is *not* his ‘real choice,’ so we may defend him against these threats to his autonomous self” on soft paternalist grounds.

<sup>40</sup> Hanna (2018, 111-116) discusses a similar case—the famous one of a Jehovah's Witness declining a blood transfusion—and argues that intervening may be justified on soft paternalistic grounds. For discussion of different variants of this Jehovah's Witness case, see Enoch (2017).

let people make the decisions themselves, even if these decisions are heavily influenced by the sexist structure. For this reason, the Subjective Sovereignty View, or a view along those lines, should guide the state in cases involving consensual sexual acts: this view is least permissive when it comes to interfering. We might say something similar in the starvation case: the state has strong bodily integrity reasons for not interfering with Starving Woman.

Now, if the choice concerns material matters, e.g., saving for pensions, it seems to us that there are weaker moral reasons against the state adopting interfering measures. The reasons against paternalistically interfering in pension decisions seem weaker than the reason against paternalistically interfering in sexual decisions. This is, we take it, at least partly because the former is not a matter of bodily integrity. In such cases, we are moving closer to one of the more permissive views that we have identified.

This illustrates why we think a contextualist answer is needed when it comes to the second question pointed to above. What it takes for the state to respect people like Woman will depend, among other things, on the context. In some contexts—such as when it comes to matters of bodily integrity—actual decisions, in the sovereignty-sense, must be respected to respect the person, even if the decision is influenced by the unjust structure within which it is made, and even if it is not in her objective interest. In other contexts—such as having to do with property, or material matters—actual decisions seem less important (or, objective interests come to seem more important, relatively speaking). Here the fact that a person would have saved more, but for the sexist structure, may be enough for a paternalistic interference to be respectful. And there are clearly other considerations which must be included as well when we determine what it takes to respect people who self-discriminate because of unjust structures, e.g., whether interventions single out those disadvantaged by the structure (Hojlund 2021, 530-531; Cornell 2015). What respect demands when people's interests and autonomy conflict is a complicated matter—and things get even more complicated once we see, as we have argued that we should, that each dimension is open to several interpretations.



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